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SUBJECT: Maoist Insurgency Exacts Heavy Toll on Food Security in Rural Nepal

REF: A) Kathmandu 1477, B) KATHMANDU 1105,

C) KATHMANDU 871

¶1. (U) Summary: Nepal's Maoist insurgency poses a serious threat to food security in many areas of Nepal, according to UN officials and other experts. The effects of Maoist raids on private food stores and food aid, military efforts to restrict Maoist food supplies, and disruptions in agriculture could lead to a major humanitarian crisis if not reversed, they say. Insurgents have stolen hundreds of metric tons of supplies provided by the World Food Program (WFP) for areas of greatest food scarcity. In response, WFP suspended programs in some areas and attached conditions to their resumption, including compensation and security guarantees. Nepal's armed forces have restricted the transport of foodstuffs to Maoist-controlled areas -- a strategy the WFP has criticized -- and offered to provide security for UN food shipments. The food security problem will likely worsen unless the insurgency can be brought under control soon. End Summary.

Crisis Looms Due to Crop Disruptions

¶2. (SBU) The ongoing violent Maoist insurgency has disrupted agriculture throughout Nepal, endangering food security for many rural communities, according to the World Food Program (WFP) Country Director for Nepal, Doug Coutts. WFP believes that the indicators of an impending food crisis are already evident. Coutts points out that "people die not because of a lack of food but because of diseases they develop when they are weakened by inadequate food." TB rates in the mountains have increased, indicating that a problem has developed, Coutts concludes. He and other observers argue that a major humanitarian crisis will be unavoidable unless current trends are reversed.

¶3. (SBU) Both looting by Maoists and government restrictions on food transport to Maoist areas have compromised food security, but disruptions in traditional agricultural practices have had by far the most devastating affect, Coutts explained. His assessment was echoed by a human rights activist who traveled recently to the heavily Maoist-affected districts of Rukum and Rolpa. She noted that local villagers had stopped raising goats and planting vegetables because these increasingly were being confiscated by Maoist cadres. Many young men and women had abandoned their villages either to join the Maoists' ranks or to escape being dragooned or otherwise victimized by the militants. An official from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) confirmed that in many areas most able-bodied people had left their farms, and the land is unattended. As a result, less food was being grown and crop yields were depressed.

¶4. (U) Because the conflict has restricted income-generation activities in rural districts, the WFP assesses that farmers have become increasingly dependent on their own crops. A FAO official sees this combination of increased dependence on farming along with a reduction in yields as potentially creating a very serious problem. (Note: Many of the worst affected groups, particularly in the western hills and mountains, live in areas where food deficits are chronic. Traditionally these populations have been unable to live on what is produced locally, depending on food purchased with income from seasonal labor performed elsewhere in Nepal or in India. End Note.)

¶5. (U) The WFP has heard reports that scarcity has led to the displacement of some individuals, but so far it has not obtained first-hand information on the numbers and current locations of these migrants. A study sponsored by USAID/Nepal found that large cities such as Nepalganj and Kathmandu along with district headquarters in conflict-affected areas have absorbed a large number of displaced persons. The study also found evidence suggesting that

traditional seasonal migration patterns have changed as a result of the conflict. A large number of individuals, mainly male youths from conflict-affected districts in the Mid- and Far Western regions, have crossed into India in recent months to escape the depredations of both the Maoists and security forces. Officials in the Terai report a marked increase in demand for Nepalese identity cards by aspiring emigrant workers to India. Moreover, the traditional return of working men to their villages of origin at the beginning of the rainy season (the season for planting paddy) has not been observed this year.

Maoists Loot Food

16. (U) The WFP's unofficial records show that Maoist insurgents have looted about 427 metric tons of program food in the last year (Ref B). This constitutes three percent of the WFP's total annual food aid through the Rural Community Infrastructure Works Program, better known as "Food for Work." Maoists have either robbed storage facilities or seized the rations while they were en route to project locations. The goods most commonly looted are dry food grains, as these are the most useful for mobile fighters. WFP also reports that of late cargo trucks carrying food for the "Food for Work" program have been unable to travel into several districts because of fear of Maoist attacks.

17. (U) Varying amounts of food have been stolen also from community stores and private homes. These food raids have hit hardest in Western Nepal, where malnutrition and limited food availability are most acute. The Maoists have been roundly criticized for stealing food. In particular, the domestic human rights community has chastised them for stealing food from WFP aid supplies and individual rural citizens.

WFP Responds by Suspending Programs, Demanding Assurances

18. (U) The WFP has responded to the Maoists' raids by suspending its programs in five districts (Ref B). Reinstatement of the programs is contingent on a set of preconditions, which are the WFP's way of trying to enforce some "basic ground rules" for the projects. WFP says it intended the preconditions to push local authorities to take the threats seriously and to investigate them, as well as to correct weaknesses in the management of the food supply, which is often unmarked and unguarded.

19. (U) One of the WFP's demands is that some of the food be recovered or that compensation be offered as a demonstration of commitment. In Jajarkot and Mugu districts (in the western hills), the WFP has insisted that before programs can resume in October, the Maoists and District Development Committees (DDCs) must ensure a safe working environment, transportation, and storage. DDCs in Kailali and Bardiya districts (in the western Terai) have been required to provide a written guarantee for the future safety of the food and compensation for the food that was stolen. The criteria for reinstatement of the program in Dailekh district is that the Maoists provide labor of a value equal to the quantity looted, albeit according to the Maoists' own valuation.

WFP's Strategy Enjoys Some Success

10. (U) The WFP's strategy has met with some success. When the first looting incident occurred, in Dailekh, the Maoists wrote a receipt for the food they took. Later they apologized and proposed that they provide work to the equivalent value of the seven tons looted. They completed the work and gave assurances to the WFP that food supplies in the district would be safe. The program then resumed. In Jajarkot and Bardiya, the Maoists have made similar commitments. And in all districts except Mugu, the DDC has expressed a willingness to provide some compensation and to take steps to ensure the safety of food stocks. Under current conditions, the WFP hopes to resume programs in Mugu and Jagarkot in October.

Military Bans Food Deliveries to Maoist Areas

11. (SBU) The military has responded to the Maoists' actions by attempting to limit the amount of food going into the most heavily Maoist-affected districts. One ranking army official stated that the tactic was to "try to starve out the terrorists." Restrictions on the transportation of dry food goods have been imposed in at least four districts. This "ban" affects Salyan, Rolpa, Rukum, and Pyuthan districts in the Mid-West. Many food suppliers have reportedly stopped deliveries as a result.

Army's Controversial Tactics

¶12. (SBU) The WFP opposes the army's strategy on the principle that food should not be used as a currency of coercion and that food supplies should not be restricted under any circumstances. They consider the military strategy doubly problematic in that it not only starves the insurgents and but also aggravates the suffering of rural non-combatants. Some observers have criticized the restriction of food imports because it appears to increase the pressure put on local people by the Maoists. One ranking military officer says that a measure of the ban's success is a reported increase in thefts of food from farm families. There is anecdotal evidence that dwindling supplies of food have hampered Maoist combat operations and encouraged the desertion or surrender of Maoist soldiers. Some personnel have indicated that the depopulation of Maoist-controlled areas, as civilians migrate to Government-controlled district centers, would be viewed as a positive outcome for the GON's counter-insurgency strategy.

¶13. (U) The WFP also claims that the military's ban has impeded its ability to transport supplies for its school feeding program and provide "wages" of rice for some Food for Work laborers. However, WFP officials admit they cannot say how large or how serious an impact the military's actions have made.

Military Offers to Guard Food Aid

¶14. (U) The military has expressed a willingness to provide protection for WFP food aid. For practical reasons, however, this protection would be limited to areas near an army post, and could not be provided in remote areas in which the army is already spread thin. Unfortunately, the WFP says, protection is needed the most in those remote areas. The WFP maintains, moreover, that the kind of support that the army can provide would not be appropriate; while military protection for food supplies can be beneficial, it could also make the stores more of a target for the Maoists. As an alternative, WFP works with local governments to establish responsible food management practices that avoid security problems.

Comment

¶15. (U) The Maoist insurgency has taken a harsh toll on food security in rural districts and has led to a marked decrease in the rural food supply. The problem is compounded by drought in many areas of western Nepal (Ref A). As UN officials here have pointed out, while the immediate effects of this decrease are difficult to measure, a large-scale humanitarian crisis could result in the months to come. Unless the Maoist conflict is ended quickly, however, Nepal's food security problems for rural residents can be expected to worsen, with severe humanitarian consequences. End Comment.

BOGGS